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P. G. WODEHOUSE
SF POETRY 1940
FANNIE HURST
ALICE BROWN

In this issue, three short stories of humor and/or romance, and a selection of pre-WWII science fiction poetry. Editor: Matt Pierard.

THE EPISODE OF THE LIVE WEEKLY

Project Gutenberg's *A Man of Means*, by P. G. Wodehouse and C. H. Bovill
Fourth of a Series of Six Stories [First published in *Pictorial Review*, August 1916]

It was with a start that Roland Bleke realized that the girl at the other end of the bench was crying. For the last few minutes, as far as his preoccupation allowed him to notice them at all, he had been attributing the subdued sniffs to a summer cold, having just recovered from one himself.

He was embarrassed. He blamed the fate that had led him to this particular bench, but he wished to give himself up to quiet deliberation on the question of what on earth he was to do with two hundred and fifty thousand pounds, to which figure his fortune had now risen.

The sniffs continued. Roland's discomfort increased. Chivalry had always been his weakness. In the old days, on a hundred and forty pounds a year, he had had few opportunities of indulging himself in this direction; but now it seemed to him sometimes that the whole world was crying out for assistance.

Should he speak to her? He wanted to; but only a few days ago his eyes had been caught by the placard of a weekly paper bearing the title of 'Squibs,' on which in large letters was the legend "Men Who Speak to Girls," and he had gathered that the accompanying article was a denunciation rather than a eulogy of these individuals. On the other hand, she was obviously in distress.

Another sniff decided him.

"I say, you know," he said.

The girl looked at him. She was small, and at the present moment had that air of the floweret surprised while shrinking, which adds a good thirty-three per cent. to a girl's attractions. Her nose, he noted, was delicately tip-tilted. A certain pallor added to her beauty. Roland's heart executed the opening steps of a buck-and-wing dance.

"Pardon me," he went on, "but you appear to be in trouble. Is there anything I can do for you?"

She looked at him again--a keen look which seemed to get into Roland's soul and walk about it with a searchlight. Then, as if satisfied by the inspection, she spoke.

"No, I don't think there is," she said. "Unless you happen to be the proprietor of a weekly paper with a Woman's Page, and need an editress for it."

"I don't understand."

"Well, that's all any one could do for me--give me back my work or give me something else of the same sort."

"Oh, have you lost your job?"

"I have. So would you mind going away, because I want to go on crying, and I do it better alone. You won't mind my turning you out, I hope, but I was here first, and there are heaps of other benches."

"No, but wait a minute. I want to hear about this. I might be able--what I mean is--think of something. Tell me all about it."

There is no doubt that the possession of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds tones down a diffident man's diffidence. Roland began to feel almost masterful.

"Why should I?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

"There's something in that," said the girl reflectively. "After all, you might know somebody. Well, as you want to know, I have just been discharged from a paper called 'Squibs.' I used to edit the Woman's Page."

"By Jove, did you write that article on 'Men Who Speak----'?"

The hard manner in which she had wrapped herself as in a garment vanished instantly. Her eyes softened. She even blushed. Just a becoming pink, you know!

"You don't mean to say you read it? I didn't think that any one ever really read 'Squibs.'"

"Read it!" cried Roland, recklessly abandoning truth. "I should jolly well think so. I know it by heart. Do you mean to say that, after an article like that, they actually sacked you? Threw you out as a failure?"

"Oh, they didn't send me away for incompetence. It was simply because they couldn't afford to keep me on. Mr. Petheram was very nice about it."

"Who's Mr. Petheram?"

"Mr. Petheram's everything. He calls himself the editor, but he's really everything except office-boy, and I expect he'll be that next week. When I started with the paper, there was quite a large staff. But it got whittled down by degrees till there was only Mr. Petheram and myself. It

was like the crew of the 'Nancy Bell.' They got eaten one by one, till I was the only one left. And now I've gone. Mr. Petheram is doing the whole paper now."

"How is it that he can't get anything better to do?" Roland said.

"He has done lots of better things. He used to be at Carmelite House, but they thought he was too old."

Roland felt relieved. He conjured up a picture of a white-haired elder with a fatherly manner.

"Oh, he's old, is he?"

"Twenty-four."

There was a brief silence. Something in the girl's expression stung Roland. She wore a rapt look, as if she were dreaming of the absent Petheram, confound him. He would show her that Petheram was not the only man worth looking rapt about.

He rose.

"Would you mind giving me your address?" he said.

"Why?"

"In order," said Roland carefully, "that I may offer you your former employment on 'Squibs.' I am going to buy it."

After all, your man of dash and enterprise, your Napoleon, does have his moments. Without looking at her, he perceived that he had bowled her over completely. Something told him that she was staring at him, open-mouthed. Meanwhile, a voice within him was muttering anxiously, "I wonder how much this is going to cost."

"You're going to buy 'Squibs!'"

Her voice had fallen away to an awestruck whisper.

"I am."

She gulped.

"Well, I think you're wonderful."

So did Roland.

"Where will a letter find you?" he asked.

"My name is March. Bessie March. I'm living at twenty-seven Guildford

Street."

"Twenty-seven. Thank you. Good morning. I will communicate with you in due course."

He raised his hat and walked away. He had only gone a few steps, when there was a patter of feet behind him. He turned.

"I--I just wanted to thank you," she said.

"Not at all," said Roland. "Not at all."

He went on his way, tingling with just triumph. Petheram? Who was Petheram? Who, in the name of goodness, was Petheram? He had put Petheram in his proper place, he rather fancied. Petheram, forsooth. Laughable.

A copy of the current number of 'Squibs,' purchased at a book-stall, informed him, after a minute search to find the editorial page, that the offices of the paper were in Fetter Lane. It was evidence of his exalted state of mind that he proceeded thither in a cab.

Fetter Lane is one of those streets in which rooms that have only just escaped being cupboards by a few feet achieve the dignity of offices. There might have been space to swing a cat in the editorial sanctum of 'Squibs,' but it would have been a near thing. As for the outer office, in which a vacant-faced lad of fifteen received Roland and instructed him to wait while he took his card in to Mr. Petheram, it was a mere box. Roland was afraid to expand his chest for fear of bruising it.

The boy returned to say that Mr. Petheram would see him.

Mr. Petheram was a young man with a mop of hair, and an air of almost painful restraint. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and the table before him was heaped high with papers. Opposite him, evidently in the act of taking his leave was a comfortable-looking man of middle age with a red face and a short beard. He left as Roland entered and Roland was surprised to see Mr. Petheram spring to his feet, shake his fist at the closing door, and kick the wall with a vehemence which brought down several inches of discolored plaster.

"Take a seat," he said, when he had finished this performance. "What can I do for you?"

Roland had always imagined that editors in their private offices were less easily approached and, when approached, more brusk. The fact was that Mr. Petheram, whose optimism nothing could quench, had mistaken him for a prospective advertiser.

"I want to buy the paper," said Roland. He was aware that this was an abrupt way of approaching the subject, but, after all, he did want to

buy the paper, so why not say so?

Mr. Petheram fizzed in his chair. He glowed with excitement.

"Do you mean to tell me there's a single book-stall in London which has sold out? Great Scott, perhaps they've all sold out! How many did you try?"

"I mean buy the whole paper. Become proprietor, you know."

Roland felt that he was blushing, and hated himself for it. He ought to be carrying this thing through with an air. Mr. Petheram looked at him blankly.

"Why?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know," said Roland. He felt the interview was going all wrong. It lacked a stateliness which this kind of interview should have had.

"Honestly?" said Mr. Petheram. "You aren't pulling my leg?"

Roland nodded. Mr. Petheram appeared to struggle with his conscience, and finally to be worsted by it, for his next remarks were limpidly honest.

"Don't you be an ass," he said. "You don't know what you're letting yourself in for. Did you see that blighter who went out just now? Do you know who he is? That's the fellow we've got to pay five pounds a week to for life."

"Why?"

"We can't get rid of him. When the paper started, the proprietors--not the present ones--thought it would give the thing a boom if they had a football competition with a first prize of a fiver a week for life. Well, that's the man who won it. He's been handed down as a legacy from proprietor to proprietor, till now we've got him. Ages ago they tried to get him to compromise for a lump sum down, but he wouldn't. Said he would only spend it, and preferred to get it by the week. Well, by the time we've paid that vampire, there isn't much left out of our profits. That's why we are at the present moment a little understaffed."

A frown clouded Mr. Petheram's brow. Roland wondered if he was thinking of Bessie March.

"I know all about that," he said.

"And you still want to buy the thing?"

"Yes."

"But what on earth for? Mind you, I ought not to be crabbing my own paper like this, but you seem a good chap, and I don't want to see you landed. Why are you doing it?"

"Oh, just for fun."

"Ah, now you're talking. If you can afford expensive amusements, go ahead."

He put his feet on the table, and lit a short pipe. His gloomy views on the subject of 'Squibs' gave way to a wave of optimism.

"You know," he said, "there's really a lot of life in the old rag yet. If it were properly run. What has hampered us has been lack of capital. We haven't been able to advertise. I'm bursting with ideas for booming the paper, only naturally you can't do it for nothing. As for editing, what I don't know about editing--but perhaps you had got somebody else in your mind?"

"No, no," said Roland, who would not have known an editor from an office-boy. The thought of interviewing prospective editors appalled him.

"Very well, then," resumed Mr. Petheram, reassured, kicking over a heap of papers to give more room for his feet. "Take it that I continue as editor. We can discuss terms later. Under the present regime I have been doing all the work in exchange for a happy home. I suppose you won't want to spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar? In other words, you would sooner have a happy, well-fed editor running about the place than a broken-down wreck who might swoon from starvation?"

"But one moment," said Roland. "Are you sure that the present proprietors will want to sell?"

"Want to sell," cried Mr. Petheram enthusiastically. "Why, if they know you want to buy, you've as much chance of getting away from them without the paper as--as--well, I can't think of anything that has such a poor chance of anything. If you aren't quick on your feet, they'll cry on your shoulder. Come along, and we'll round them up now."

He struggled into his coat, and gave his hair an impatient brush with a note-book.

"There's just one other thing," said Roland. "I have been a regular reader of 'Squibs' for some time, and I particularly admire the way in which the Woman's Page----"

"You mean you want to reengage the editress? Rather. You couldn't do better. I was going to suggest it myself. Now, come along quick before you change your mind or wake up."

Within a very few days of becoming sole proprietor of 'Squibs,' Roland began to feel much as a man might who, a novice at the art of steering cars, should find himself at the wheel of a runaway motor. Young Mr. Petheram had spoken nothing less than the truth when he had said that he was full of ideas for booming the paper. The infusion of capital into the business acted on him like a powerful stimulant. He exuded ideas at every pore.

Roland's first notion had been to engage a staff of contributors. He was under the impression that contributors were the life-blood of a weekly journal. Mr. Petheram corrected this view. He consented to the purchase of a lurid serial story, but that was the last concession he made. Nobody could accuse Mr. Petheram of lack of energy. He was willing, even anxious, to write the whole paper himself, with the exception of the Woman's Page, now brightly conducted once more by Miss March. What he wanted Roland to concentrate himself upon was the supplying of capital for ingenious advertising schemes.

"How would it be," he asked one morning--he always began his remarks with, "How would it be?"--"if we paid a man to walk down Piccadilly in white skin-tights with the word 'Squibs' painted in red letters across his chest?"

Roland thought it would certainly not be.

"Good sound advertising stunt," urged Mr. Petheram. "You don't like it? All right. You're the boss. Well, how would it be to have a squad of men dressed as Zulus with white shields bearing the legend 'Squibs'? See what I mean? Have them sprinting along the Strand shouting, 'Wah! Wah! Wah! Buy it! Buy it!' It would make people talk."

Roland emerged from these interviews with his skin crawling with modest apprehension. His was a retiring nature, and the thought of Zulus sprinting down the Strand shouting "Wah! Wah! Wah! Buy it! Buy it!" with reference to his personal property appalled him.

He was beginning now heartily to regret having bought the paper, as he generally regretted every definite step which he took. The glow of romance which had sustained him during the preliminary negotiations had faded entirely. A girl has to be possessed of unusual charm to continue to captivate B, when she makes it plain daily that her heart is the exclusive property of A; and Roland had long since ceased to cherish any delusion that Bessie March was ever likely to feel anything but a mild liking for him. Young Mr. Petheram had obviously staked out an indisputable claim. Her attitude toward him was that of an affectionate devotee toward a high priest. One morning, entering the office unexpectedly, Roland found her kissing the top of Mr. Petheram's head; and from that moment his interest in the fortunes of 'Squibs' sank to zero. It amazed him that he could ever have been idiot enough to have allowed himself to be entangled in this insane venture for the sake

of an insignificant-looking bit of a girl with a snub-nose and a poor complexion.

What particularly galled him was the fact that he was throwing away good cash for nothing. It was true that his capital was more than equal to the, on the whole, modest demands of the paper, but that did not alter the fact that he was wasting money. Mr. Petheram always talked buoyantly about turning the corner, but the corner always seemed just as far off.

The old idea of flight, to which he invariably had recourse in any crisis, came upon Roland with irresistible force. He packed a bag, and went to Paris. There, in the discomforts of life in a foreign country, he contrived for a month to forget his white elephant.

He returned by the evening train which deposits the traveler in London in time for dinner.

Strangely enough, nothing was farther from Roland's mind than his bright weekly paper, as he sat down to dine in a crowded grill-room near Piccadilly Circus. Four weeks of acute torment in a city where nobody seemed to understand the simplest English sentence had driven 'Squibs' completely from his mind for the time being.

The fact that such a paper existed was brought home to him with the coffee. A note was placed upon his table by the attentive waiter.

"What's this?" he asked.

"The lady, sare," said the waiter vaguely.

Roland looked round the room excitedly. The spirit of romance gripped him. There were many ladies present, for this particular restaurant was a favorite with artistes who were permitted to "look in" at their theaters as late as eight-thirty. None of them looked particularly self-conscious, yet one of them had sent him this quite unsolicited tribute. He tore open the envelope.

The message, written in a flowing feminine hand, was brief, and Mrs. Grundy herself could have taken no exception to it.

"'Squibs,' one penny weekly, buy it," it ran. All the mellowing effects of a good dinner passed away from Roland. He was feverishly irritated. He paid his bill and left the place.

A visit to a neighboring music-hall occurred to him as a suitable sedative. Hardly had his nerves ceased to quiver sufficiently to allow him to begin to enjoy the performance, when, in the interval between two of the turns, a man rose in one of the side boxes.

"Is there a doctor in the house?"

There was a hush in the audience. All eyes were directed toward the box. A man in the stalls rose, blushing, and cleared his throat.

"My wife has fainted," continued the speaker. "She has just discovered that she has lost her copy of 'Squibs.'"

The audience received the statement with the bovine stolidity of an English audience in the presence of the unusual.

Not so Roland. Even as the purposeful-looking chuckers-out wended their leopard-like steps toward the box, he was rushing out into the street.

As he stood cooling his indignation in the pleasant breeze which had sprung up, he was aware of a dense crowd proceeding toward him. It was headed by an individual who shone out against the drab background like a good deed in a naughty world. Nature hath framed strange fellows in her time, and this was one of the strangest that Roland's bulging eyes had ever rested upon. He was a large, stout man, comfortably clad in a suit of white linen, relieved by a scarlet 'Squibs' across the bosom. His top-hat, at least four sizes larger than any top-hat worn out of a pantomime, flaunted the same word in letters of flame. His umbrella, which, tho the weather was fine, he carried open above his head, bore the device "One penny weekly".

The arrest of this person by a vigilant policeman and Roland's dive into a taxicab occurred simultaneously. Roland was blushing all over. His head was in a whirl. He took the evening paper handed in through the window of the cab quite mechanically, and it was only the strong exhortations of the vendor which eventually induced him to pay for it. This he did with a sovereign, and the cab drove off.

He was just thinking of going to bed several hours later, when it occurred to him that he had not read his paper. He glanced at the first page. The middle column was devoted to a really capitally written account of the proceedings at Bow Street consequent upon the arrest of six men who, it was alleged, had caused a crowd to collect to the disturbance of the peace by parading the Strand in the undress of Zulu warriors, shouting in unison the words "Wah! Wah! Wah! Buy 'Squibs.'"

* * * * *

Young Mr. Petheram greeted Roland with a joyous enthusiasm which the hound Argus, on the return of Ulysses, might have equalled but could scarcely have surpassed.

It seemed to be Mr. Petheram's considered opinion that God was in His Heaven and all was right with the world. Roland's attempts to correct this belief fell on deaf ears.

"Have I seen the advertisements?" he cried, echoing his editor's first question. "I've seen nothing else."

"There!" said Mr. Petheram proudly.

"It can't go on."

"Yes, it can. Don't you worry. I know they're arrested as fast as we send them out, but, bless you, the supply's endless. Ever since the Revue boom started and actors were expected to do six different parts in seven minutes, there are platoons of music-hall 'pros' hanging about the Strand, ready to take on any sort of job you offer them. I have a special staff flushing the Bodegas. These fellows love it. It's meat and drink to them to be right in the public eye like that. Makes them feel ten years younger. It's wonderful the talent knocking about. Those Zulus used to have a steady job as the Six Brothers Biff, Society Contortionists. The Revue craze killed them professionally. They cried like children when we took them on.

"By the way, could you put through an expenses cheque before you go? The fines mount up a bit. But don't you worry about that either. We're coining money. I'll show you the returns in a minute. I told you we should turn the corner. Turned it! Blame me, we've whizzed round it on two wheels. Have you had time to see the paper since you got back? No? Then you haven't seen our new Scandal Page--'We Just Want to Know, You Know.' It's a corker, and it's sent the circulation up like a rocket. Everybody reads 'Squibs' now. I was hoping you would come back soon. I wanted to ask you about taking new offices. We're a bit above this sort of thing now."

Roland, meanwhile, was reading with horrified eyes the alleged corking Scandal Page. It seemed to him without exception the most frightful production he had ever seen. It appalled him.

"This is awful," he moaned. "We shall have a hundred libel actions."

"Oh, no, that's all right. It's all fake stuff, tho the public doesn't know it. If you stuck to real scandals you wouldn't get a par. a week. A more moral set of blameless wasters than the blighters who constitute modern society you never struck. But it reads all right, doesn't it? Of course, every now and then one does hear something genuine, and then it goes in. For instance, have you ever heard of Percy Pook, the bookie? I have got a real ripe thing in about Percy this week, the absolute limpid truth. It will make him sit up a bit. There, just under your thumb."

Roland removed his thumb, and, having read the paragraph in question, started as if he had removed it from a snake.

"But this is bound to mean a libel action!" he cried.

"Not a bit of it," said Mr. Petheram comfortably. "You don't know Percy. I won't bore you with his life-history, but take it from me he doesn't rush into a court of law from sheer love of it. You're safe enough."

* * * * *

But it appeared that Mr. Pook, tho coy in the matter of cleansing his scutcheon before a judge and jury, was not wholly without weapons of defense and offense. Arriving at the office next day, Roland found a scene of desolation, in the middle of which, like Marius among the ruins of Carthage, sat Jimmy, the vacant-faced office boy. Jimmy was reading an illustrated comic paper, and appeared undisturbed by his surroundings.

"He's gorn," he observed, looking up as Roland entered.

"What do you mean?" Roland snapped at him. "Who's gone and where did he go? And besides that, when you speak to your superiors you will rise and stop chewing that infernal gum. It gets on my nerves."

Jimmy neither rose nor relinquished his gum. He took his time and answered.

"Mr. Petheram. A couple of fellers come in and went through, and there was a uproar inside there, and presently out they come running, and I went in, and there was Mr. Petheram on the floor knocked silly and the furniture all broke, and now 'e's gorn to 'orspital. Those fellers 'ad been putting 'im froo it proper," concluded Jimmy with moody relish.

Roland sat down weakly. Jimmy, his tale told, resumed the study of his illustrated paper. Silence reigned in the offices of 'Squibs.'

It was broken by the arrival of Miss March. Her exclamation of astonishment at the sight of the wrecked room led to a repetition of Jimmy's story.

She vanished on hearing the name of the hospital to which the stricken editor had been removed, and returned an hour later with flashing eyes and a set jaw.

"Aubrey," she said--it was news to Roland that Mr. Petheram's name was Aubrey--"is very much knocked about, but he is conscious and sitting up and taking nourishment."

"That's good."

"In a spoon only."

"Ah!" said Roland.

"The doctor says he will not be out for a week. Aubrey is certain it was that horrible book-maker's men who did it, but of course he can prove nothing. But his last words to me were, 'Slip it into Percy again this week.' He has given me one or two things to mention. I don't understand

them, but Aubrey says they will make him wild."

Roland's flesh crept. The idea of making Mr. Pook any wilder than he appeared to be at present horrified him. Panic gave him strength, and he addressed Miss March, who was looking more like a modern Joan of Arc than anything else on earth, firmly.

"Miss March," he said, "I realize that this is a crisis, and that we must all do all that we can for the paper, and I am ready to do anything in reason--but I will not slip it into Percy. You have seen the effects of slipping it into Percy. What he or his minions will do if we repeat the process I do not care to think."

"You are afraid?"

"Yes," said Roland simply.

Miss March turned on her heel. It was plain that she regarded him as a worm. Roland did not like being thought a worm, but it was infinitely better than being regarded as an interesting case by the house-surgeon of a hospital. He belonged to the school of thought which holds that it is better that people should say of you, "There he goes!" than that they should say, "How peaceful he looks".

Stress of work prevented further conversation. It was a revelation to Roland, the vigor and energy with which Miss March threw herself into the breach. As a matter of fact, so tremendous had been the labors of the departed Mr. Petheram, that her work was more apparent than real. Thanks to Mr. Petheram, there was a sufficient supply of material in hand to enable 'Squibs' to run a fortnight on its own momentum. Roland, however, did not know this, and with a view to doing what little he could to help, he informed Miss March that he would write the Scandal Page. It must be added that the offer was due quite as much to prudence as to chivalry. Roland simply did not dare to trust her with the Scandal Page. In her present mood it was not safe. To slip it into Percy would, he felt, be with her the work of a moment.

* * * * *

Literary composition had never been Roland's forte. He sat and stared at the white paper and chewed the pencil which should have been marring its whiteness with stinging paragraphs. No sort of idea came to him.

His brow grew damp. What sort of people--except book-makers--did things you could write scandal about? As far as he could ascertain, nobody.

He picked up the morning paper. The name Windlebird [*] caught his eye. A kind of pleasant melancholy came over him as he read the paragraph. How long ago it seemed since he had met that genial financier. The paragraph was not particularly interesting. It gave a brief account of some large deal which Mr. Windlebird was negotiating. Roland did not

understand a word of it, but it gave him an idea.

[*] He is a character in the Second Episode, a fraudulent financier.

Mr. Windlebird's financial standing, he knew, was above suspicion. Mr. Windlebird had made that clear to him during his visit. There could be no possibility of offending Mr. Windlebird by a paragraph or two about the manners and customs of financiers. Phrases which his kindly host had used during his visit came back to him, and with them inspiration.

Within five minutes he had compiled the following

WE JUST WANT TO KNOW, YOU KNOW

WHO is the eminent financier at present engaged upon one of his biggest deals?

WHETHER the public would not be well-advised to look a little closer into it before investing their money?

IF it is not a fact that this gentleman has bought a first-class ticket to the Argentine in case of accidents?

WHETHER he may not have to use it at any moment?

After that it was easy. Ideas came with a rush. By the end of an hour he had completed a Scandal Page of which Mr. Petheram himself might have been proud, without a suggestion of slipping it into Percy. He felt that he could go to Mr. Pook, and say, "Percy, on your honor as a British book-maker, have I slipped it into you in any way whatsoever?" And Mr. Pook would be compelled to reply, "You have not."

Miss March read the proofs of the page, and sniffed. But Miss March's blood was up, and she would have sniffed at anything not directly hostile to Mr. Pook.

* * * * *

A week later Roland sat in the office of 'Squibs,' reading a letter. It had been sent from No. 18-A Bream's Buildings, E.C., but, from Roland's point of view, it might have come direct from heaven; for its contents, signed by Harrison, Harrison, Harrison & Harrison, Solicitors, were to the effect that a client of theirs had instructed them to approach him with a view to purchasing the paper. He would not find their client disposed to haggle over terms, so, hoped Messrs. Harrison, Harrison, Harrison & Harrison, in the event of Roland being willing to sell, they could speedily bring matters to a satisfactory conclusion.

Any conclusion which had left him free of 'Squibs' without actual pecuniary loss would have been satisfactory to Roland. He had conceived a loathing for his property which not even its steadily increasing sales

could mitigate. He was around at Messrs. Harrison's office as soon as a swift taxi could take him there. The lawyers were for spinning the thing out with guarded remarks and cautious preambles, but Roland's methods of doing business were always rapid.

"This chap," he said, "this fellow who wants to buy 'Squibs,' what'll he give?"

"That," began one of the Harrisons ponderously, "would, of course, largely depend-----"

"I'll take five thousand. Lock, stock, and barrel, including the present staff, an even five thousand. How's that?"

"Five thousand is a large-----"

"Take it or leave it."

"My dear sir, you hold a pistol to our heads. However, I think that our client might consent to the sum you mention."

"Good. Well, directly I get his check, the thing's his. By the way, who is your client?"

Mr. Harrison coughed.

"His name," he said, "will be familiar to you. He is the eminent financier, Mr. Geoffrey Windlebird."



the phantoms

by Joseph E. Kellerman

All day they played among the purple flowers
That lay like frozen flames upon the lawn;
Or dreamed within the shadows of the towers
Whose turret tops were painted as the dawn.
Bright was the garden; peace went everywhere
There was no breath of movement nor any sound
Save butterflies that clove the heavy air,
Or when the bright fruit dropped slowly to the ground.
Then the flowers drooped, from sliver thorns that tore;
Too soon the sun had died in amber smoke,
And frightened now but silent as before
The phantoms watched the garden change its cloak.
Great sable moths flew out, and one by one
The towers melted with the fallen sun.

WOULD YOU?

by J. Harvey Haggard

Would you stroll with me, my loved one
'Neath the pale Venusian Moon,
Where its misty orb goes drifting,
Waning, darling, all too soon?
Would you gaze into the rainbow
Where the lunar moonbeams play,
Could it be you'd softly answer
"Yes, for all those things I pray?"
If it's so, my darling, kick me,
For I'd surely be a ninny,
Making love by Venus moonlight--
When--you see--there isn't any!

ninevah

by J. E. Kelleam

They say the bittern and the cormorant
Have nested in the upper lintels there.
The wind builds flowers of dust upon the air,
Lifting and falling, slow and hesitant.
Within the crumbling temples beasts have laired;
Eyeless the windows, broken the terraces;
No laughter breaks the silence. The palaces
Are weathered and the cedar work is bared.

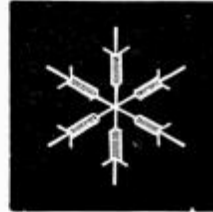
If this be glory's wage, then let me trust
The fragile things that are not built of might,
The lovely things that leave no trace when gone:
The rose that swiftly turns into the dust,
Beauty that blazed a moment----Or a night
Of golden stars forgotten with the dawn.

I'VE NEVER SEEN

by Hannes Bok

I've never seen a Flirtenflog.
I've heard that it's a Martian dog.
But science-fiction has romanced
That the Martian race is much advanced;
So thus my reasoning should be,
Has a Flirtenflog ever seen ME?????

All from The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Futura Fantasia*, Spring 1940, by Various



THE SMUDGE

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *The Vertical City*, by Fannie Hurst

In the bleak little graveyard of Hattie Bertch's dead hopes, dead loves,
and dead ecstasies, more than one headstone had long since begun to sag
and the wreaths of bleeding heart to shrivel.

That was good, because the grave that is kept bubbly with tears is a
tender, quivering thing, almost like an amputated bit of self that still
aches with threads of life.

Even over the mound of her dead ambitions, which grave she had dug with
the fingers of her heart, Hattie could walk now with unsensitive feet.
It had become dry clay with cracks in it like sardonic smiles.

Smiles. That was the dreadful part, because the laugh where there

have been tears is not a nice laugh, and Hattie could sit among the headstones of her dead dreams now and laugh. But not horridly. Just drearily.

There was one grave, Heart's Desire, that was still a little moist. But it, too, of late years, had begun to sink in, like an old mouth with receding gums, as if the very teeth of a smiling dream had rotted. They had.

Hattie, whose heart's desire had once been to play Juliet, played maids now. Buxom negro ones, with pale palms, white eyes, and the beat of kettledrums somewhere close to the cuticle of the balls of her feet.

She was irrevocably down on managers' and agents' lists as "comedy black." Countless the premiers she had opened to the fleck of a duster! Hattie came high, as maids go. One hundred and fifty dollars a week and no road engagements. She dressed alone. Her part in "Love Me Long" had been especially written in for the sake of the peculiar kind of comedy relief she could bring to it. A light roar of recognition swept the audience at her entrance. Once in a while, a handclap. So Hattie, whose heart's desire had once been to play Juliet, played maids now. Buxomly.

And this same Hattie, whose heart's desire had once been to kiss Love, but whose lips were still a little twisted with the taste of clay, could kiss only Love's offspring now. But not bitterly. Thanksgivingly.

Love's offspring was Marcia. Sixteen and the color and odor of an ivory fan that has lain in frangipani. And Hattie could sometimes poke her tongue into her cheek over this bit of whimsy:

It was her well-paid effort in the burnt cork that made possible, for instance, the frill of real lace that lay to the low little neck of Marcia's first party dress, as if blown there in sea spume.

Out of the profits of Hattie's justly famous Brown Cold Cream--Guaranteed Color-fast--Mulatto, Medium, Chocolate, had come Marcia's ermine muff and tippet; the enamel toilet set; the Steinway grand piano; the yearly and by no means light tuition toll at Miss Harperly's Select Day School for Girls.

You get the whimsy of it? For everything fair that was Marcia, Hattie had brownly paid for. Lilingly, and with the rill of the song of thanksgiving in her heart.

That was how Hattie moved through her time. Hugging this melody of Marcia. Through the knife-edged nervous evenings in the theater. Bawlings. Purple lips with loose muscles crawling under the rouge. Fetidness of scent on stale bodies. Round faces that could hook into the look of vultures when the smell of success became as the smell of red meat. All the petty soiled vanities, like the disordered boudoir of a cocotte. The perpetual stink of perfume. Powder on the air and caking

the breathing. Open dressing-room doors that should have been closed. The smelling geometry of the make-up box. Curls. Corsets. Cosmetics. Men in undershirts, grease-painting. "Gawdalmighty, Tottie, them's my teddy bears you're puttin' on." Raw nerves. Raw emotions. Ego, the actor's overtone, abroad everywhere and full of strut. "Overture!" The wait in the wings. Dizziness at the pit of the stomach. Audiences with lean jaws etched into darkness. Jaws that can smile or crack your bones and eat you. Faces swimming in the stage ozone and wolfish for cue. The purple lips--

Almost like a frieze stuck on to the border of each day was Hattie's life in the theater. Passementerie.

That was how Hattie treated it. Especially during those placid years of the phenomenal New York run of "Love Me Long." The outer edge of her reality. The heart of her reality? Why, the heart of it was the long morning hours in her own fragrant kitchen over doughnuts boiled in oil and snowed under in powdered sugar! Cookies that bit with a snap. Filet of sole boned with fingers deft at it and served with a merest fluff of tartar sauce. Marcia ate like that. Preciously. Pecksniffily. An egg at breakfast a gag to the sensibilities! So Hattie ate hers in the kitchen, standing, and tucked the shell out of sight, wrapped in a lettuce leaf. Beefsteak, for instance, sickened Marcia, because there was blood in the ooze of its juices. But Hattie had a sly way of camouflage. Filet mignon (so strengthening, you see) crushed under a little millinery of mushrooms and served under glass. Then when Marcia's neat little row of neat little teeth bit in and the munch began behind clean and careful lips, Hattie's heart, a regular old bandit for cunning, beat hoppity, skippity, jump!

Those were her realities. Home. The new sandwich cutters. Heart shape. Diamond shape. Spade. The strip of hall carpet newly discovered to scour like new with brush and soap and warm water. Epstein's meat market throws in free suet. The lamp with the opal-silk shade for Marcia's piano. White oilcloth is cleaner than shelf paper. Dotted Swiss curtains, the ones in Marcia's room looped back with pink bows. Old sashes, pressed out and fringed at the edges.

And if you think that Hattie's six rooms and bath and sunny, full-sized kitchen, on Morningside Heights, were trumped-up ones of the press agent for the Sunday Supplement, look in.

Any afternoon. Tuesday, say, and Marcia just home from school. On Tuesday afternoon of every other week Hattie made her cream, in a large copper pot that hung under the sink. Six dozen half-pint jars waiting to be filled with Brown Cold Cream. One hundred and forty-four jars a month. Guaranteed Color-fast. Mulatto, Medium, Chocolate. Labeled. Sealed. Sold. And demand exceeding the supply. An ingratiating, expert cream, known the black-faced world over. It slid into the skin, not sootily, but illuminating it to winking, African copper. For instance, Hattie's make-up cream for Linda in "Love Me Long" was labeled

"Chocolate." But it worked in even a truer brown, as if it had come out of the pigment instead of gone into the pores.

Four hours of stirring it took, adding with exact minutiae the mysteriously proper proportions of spermacetti, oil of sweet almonds, white wax--But never mind. Hattie's dark secret was her own.

Fourteen years of her black art as Broadway's maid _de luxe_ had been her laboratory. It was almost her boast now--remember the sunken headstones--that she had handled spotlessly every fair young star of the theaters' last ten years.

It was as mysterious as pigment, her cream, and as true, and netted her, with occasional extra batches, an average of two hundred dollars a month. She enjoyed making it. Singing as she stirred or rather stirring as she sang, the plenitude of her figure enveloped in a blue-and-white bungalow apron with rickrack trimming.

Often Marcia, home from day school, watched. Propped up in the window frame with her pet cat, a Persian, with eyes like swimming pools with painted green bottoms, seated in a perfect circle in her quiet lap, for all the world in the attitude of a sardel except for the toothpick through.

Sometimes it almost seemed as if Marcia did the purring. She could sit like that, motionless, her very stare seeming to sleep. To Hattie that stare was beautiful, and in a way it was. As if two blue little suns were having their high noon.

Sometimes Marcia offered to help, because toward the end, Hattie's back could ache at this process, terribly, the pain knotting itself into her face when the rotary movement of her stirring arm began to yank at her nerves.

"Momie, I'll stir for a while."

Marcia's voice was day-schooled. As clipped, as boxed, and as precise as a hedge. Neat, too, as neat as the way her clear lips met, and her teeth, which had a little mannerism of coming down after each word, biting them off like threads. They were appealing teeth that had never grown big or square. Very young corn. To Hattie there was something about them that reminded her of a tiny set of Marcia's doll dishes that she had saved. Little innocences.

"I don't mind stirring, dear. I'm not tired."

"But your face is all twisted."

Hattie's twisted face could induce in Marcia the same gagged pallor that the egg in the morning or the red in the beefsteak juices brought there.

"Go in and play the piano awhile, Marcy, I'll be finished soon."

"Sh-h-h! No. Pussy-kitty's asleep."

As the cream grew heavier and its swirl in the pot slower, Hattie could keep the twist out of her face only by biting her tongue. She did, and a little arch of sweat came out in a mustache.

The brown mud of the cream began to fluff. Hattie rubbed a fleck of it into her freckled forearm. Yes, Hattie's arm was freckled, and so was the bridge of her nose, in a little saddle. Once there had been a prettiness to the freckles because they whitened the skin they sprinkled and were little stars to the moon reddiness of Hattie's hair. But the red of the moon had set coldly in Hattie's hair now, and the stars were just freckles, and there was the dreaded ridge of flesh showing above the ridge of her corsets, and when she leaned forward to stir her cheeks hung forward like a spaniel's, not of fat, but heaviness. Hattie's arms and thighs were granite to the touch and to the scales. Kindly freckled granite. She weighed almost twice what she looked. Marcia, whose hips were like lyres, hated the ridge above the corset line and massaged it. Mab smacking the Himalayas.

After a while, there in the window frame, Marcia closed her eyes. There was still the illusion of a purr about her. Probably because, as her kitten warmed in its circle, its coziness began to whirl mountingly. The September afternoon was full of drone. The roofs of the city from Hattie's kitchen window, which overlooked Morningside Heights, lay flat as slaps. Tranced, indoor quiet. Presently Hattie began to tiptoe. The seventy-two jars were untopped now, in a row on a board over the built-in washtub. Seventy-two yawning for content. Squunch! Her enormous spoon into the copper kettle and flop, gurgle, gooze, softly into the jars. One-two-three--At the sixty-eighth, Marcia, without stirring or lifting her lids, spoke into the sucky silence.

"Momie?"

"Yes, Marcy."

"You'll be glad."

Hattie, pausing at the sixty-eighth, "Why, dear?"

"I came home in Nonie Grosbeck's automobile. I'm invited to a dinner dance October the seventeenth. At their house in Gramercy Park."

The words must have gone to Hattie's knees, because, dropping a spat of mulatto cold cream on the linoleum, she sat down weakly on the kitchen chair that she had painted blue and white to match the china cereal set on the shelf above it.

"Marcy!"

"And she likes me better than any girl in school, mommie, and I'm to be her chum from to-day on, and not another girl in school is invited except Edwina Nelson, because her father's on nearly all the same boards of directors with Mr. Grosbeck, and--"

"Marcia! Marcia! and you came home from school just as if nothing had happened! Child, sometimes I think you're made of ice."

"Why, I'm glad, mommie."

But that's what there were, little ice glints of congealed satisfaction in Marcia's eyes.

"Glad," said Hattie, the word full of tears. "Why, honey, you don't realize it, but this is the beginning! This is the meaning of my struggle to get you into Miss Harperly's school. It wasn't easy. I've never told you the--strings I had to pull. Conservative people, you see. That's what the Grosbecks are, too. Home people. The kind who can afford to wear dowdy hats and who have lived in the same house for thirty years."

"Nome's mother was born in the house they live in."

"Substantial people, who half-sole their shoes and endow colleges. Taxpayers. Policyholders. Church members. Oh, Marcia, those are the safe people!"

"There's a Grosbeck memorial window in the Rock Church."

"I used to be so afraid for you, Marcy. Afraid you would take to the make-believe folks. The play people. The theater. I used to fear for you! The Pullman car. The furnished room. That going to the hotel room, alone, nights after the show. You laugh at me sometimes for just throwing a veil over my face and coming home black-face. It's because I'm too tired, Marcy. Too lonesome for home. On the road I always used to think of all the families in the audience. The husbands and wives. Brides and grooms. Sweethearts. After the performance they all went to homes. To brownstone fronts like the Grosbecks'. To cottages. To flats. With a snack to eat in the refrigerator or laid out on the dining-room table. Lamps burning and waiting. Nighties laid out and bedcovers turned back. And then--me. Second-rate hotels. That walk through the dark downtown streets. Passing men who address you through closed lips. The dingy lobby. There's no applause lasts long enough, Marcia, to reach over that moment when you unlock your hotel room and the smell of disinfectant and unturned mattress comes out to you."

"Ugh!"

"Oh, keep to the safe people, Marcia! The unexciting people, maybe, but the safe home-building ones with old ideals and old hearthstones."

"Nonie says they have one in their library that comes from Italy."

"Hitch your ideal to a hearthstone like that, Marcia."

"Nonie goes to riding academy."

"So shall you."

"It's six dollars an hour."

"I don't care."

"Her father's retired except for being director in banks. And, momie--they don't mind, dear--about us. Nonie knows that my--father is--is separated and never lived at home with us. She's broad-minded. She says just so there's no scandal, a divorce, or anything like that. She said it's vulgar to cultivate only rich friends. She says she'd go with me even if she's forbidden to."

"Why, Marcy darling, why should she be forbidden?"

"Oh, Nonie's broadminded. She says if two people are unsuited they should separate, quietly, like you and my father. She knows we're one of the first old Southern families on my father's side. I--I'm not trying to make you talk about it, dear, but--but we are--aren't we?"

"Yes, Marcy."

"He--he was just--irresponsible. That's not being--not nice people, is it?"

"No, Marcy."

"Nonie's not forbidden. She just meant in case, momie. You see, with some old families like hers--the stage--but Nonie says her father couldn't even say anything to that if he wanted to. His own sister went on the stage once, and they had to hush it up in the papers."

"Did you explain to her, Marcy, that stage life at its best can be full of fine ideals and truth? Did you make her see how regular your own little life has been? How little you know about--my work? How away I've kept you? How I won't even play out-of-town engagements so we can always be together in our little home? You must explain all those things to your friends at Miss Harperly's. It helps--with steady people."

"I have, momie, and she's going to bring me home every afternoon in their automobile after we've called for her brother Archie at Columbia Law School."

"Marcy! the Grosbeck automobile bringing you home every day!"

"And it's going to call for me the night of the party. Nonie's getting a lemon taffeta."

"I'll get you ivory, with a bit of real lace!"

"Oh, momie, momie, I can scarcely wait!"

"What did she say, Marcy, when she asked--invited you?"

"She?"

"Nonie."

"Why--she--didn't invite me, momie."

"But you just said--"

"It was her brother Archie invited me. We called for him at Columbia Law School, you see. It was he invited me. Of course Nonie wants me and said 'Yes' right after him--but it's he--who wants Nonie and me to be chums. I--He--I thought--I--told--you--momie."

Suddenly Marcia's eyes, almost with the perpendicular slits of her kitten's in them, seemed to swish together like portières, shutting Hattie behind them with her.

"Oh--my Marcy!" said Hattie, dimly, after a while, as if from their depths. "Marcy, dearest!"

"At--at Harperly's, momie, almost all the popular upper-class girls wear--a--a boy's fraternity pin."

"Fraternity pin?"

"It's the--the beginning of being engaged."

"But, Marcy--"

"Archie's a Pi Phi!"

"A--what?"

"A Pi Phi."

"Phi--pie--Marcy--dear--"

* * * * *

On October 17th "Love Me Long" celebrated its two-hundredth performance. Souvenir programs. A few appropriate words by the management.

A flashlight of the cast. A round of wine passed in the after-the-performance gloom of the wings. Aqueous figures fading off in the orderly back-stage fashion of a well-established success.

Hattie kissed the star. They liked each other with the unenvy of their divergent roles. Miss Robinson even humored some of Hattie's laughs. She liked to feel the flame of her own fairness as she stood there waiting for the audience to guffaw its fill of Hattie's drolleries; a narcissus swaying reedily beside a black crocodile.

She was a new star and her beauty the color of cloth of gold, and Hattie in her lowly comedian way not an undistinguished veteran. So they could kiss in the key of a cat cannot unseat a king.

But, just the same, Miss Robinson's hand flew up automatically against the dark of Hattie's lips.

"I don't fade off, dearie. Your own natural skin is no more color-fast. I handled Elaine Doremus in 'The Snowdrop' for three seasons. Never so much as a speck or a spot on her. My cream don't fade."

"Of course not, dear! How silly of me! Kiss me again."

That was kind enough of her. Oh yes, they got on. But sometimes Hattie, seated among her sagging headstones, would ache with the dry sob of the black crocodile who yearned toward the narcissus....

Quite without precedent, there was a man waiting for her in the wings.

The gloom of back-stage was as high as trees and Hattie had not seen him in sixteen years. But she knew. With the stunned consciousness of a stabbed person that glinting instant before the blood begins to flow.

It was Morton Sebree--Marcia's father.

"Morton!"

"Hattie."

"Come up to my dressing room," she said, as matter-of-factly as if her brain were a clock ticking off the words.

They walked up an iron staircase of unreality. Fantastic stairs. Wisps of gloom. Singing pains in her climbing legs like a piano key hit very hard and held down with a pressing forefinger. She could listen to her pain. That was her thought as she climbed. How the irrelevant little ideas would slide about in her sudden chaos. She must concentrate now. Terribly. Morton was back.

His hand, a smooth glabrous one full of clutch, riding up the banister. It could have been picked off, finger by finger. It was that kind of a

hand. But after each lift, another finger would have curled back again. Morton's hand, ascending the dark like a soul on a string in a burlesque show.

Face to face. The electric bulb in her dressing room was incased in a wire like a baseball mask. A burning prison of light. Fat sticks of grease paint with the grain of Hattie's flesh printed on the daub end. Furiously brown cheesecloth. An open jar of cream (chocolate) with the gesture of the gouge in it. A woolly black wig on a shelf, its kinks seeming to crawl. There was a rim of Hattie _au naturel_ left around her lips. It made of her mouth a comedy blubber, her own rather firm lips sliding about somewhere in the lightish swamp. That was all of Hattie that looked out. Except her eyes. They were good gray eyes with popping whites now, because of a trick of blackening the lids. But the irises were in their pools, inviolate.

"Well, Hattie, I reckon I'd have known you even under black."

"I thought you were in Rio."

"Got to hankering after the States, Hattie."

"I read of a Morris Seebree died in Brazil. Sometimes I used to think maybe it might have been a misprint--and--that--you--were--the--one."

"No, no. 'Live and kickin'. Been up around here a good while."

"Where?"

"Home. N'Orleans. M' mother died, Hattie, God rest her bones. Know it?"

"No."

"Cancer."

It was a peculiar silence. A terrible word like that was almost slowly soluble in it. Gurgling down.

"O-oh!"

"Sort of gives a fellow the shivers, Hattie, seeing you kinda hidin' behind yourself like this. But I saw you come in the theater to-night. You looked right natural. Little heavier."

"What do you want?"

"Why, I guess a good many things in general and nothing in particular, as the sayin' goes. You don't seem right glad to see me, honey."

"Glad!" said Hattie, and laughed as if her mirth were a dice shaking in a box of echoes.

"Your hair's right red yet. Looked mighty natural walkin' into the theater to-night. Take off those kinks, honey."

She reached for her cleansing cream, then stopped, her eyes full of the foment of torture.

"What's my looks to you?"

"You've filled out."

"You haven't," she said, putting down the cold-cream jar. "You haven't aged an hour. Your kind lies on life like it was a wall in the sun. A wall that somebody else has built for you stone by stone."

"I reckon you're right in some ways, Hattie. There's been a meanderin' streak in me somewheres. You and m' mother, God rest her bones, had a different way of scoldin' me for the same thing. Lot o' Huck Finn in me."

"Don't use bad-boy words for vicious, bad-man deeds!"

"But you liked me. Both of you liked me, honey. Only two women I ever really cared for, too. You and m' mother."

Her face might have been burning paper, curling her scorn for him.

"Don't try that, Morton. It won't work any more. What used to infatuate me only disgusts me now. The things I thought I--loved--in you, I loathe now. The kind of cancer that killed your mother is the kind that eats out the heart. I never knew her, never even saw her except from a distance, but I know, just as well as if I'd lived in that fine big house with her all those years in New Orleans, that you were the sickness that ailed her--lying, squandering, gambling, no-'count son! If she and I are the only women you ever cared for, thank God that there aren't any more of us to suffer from you. Morton, when I read that a Morris Seabee had died in Brazil, I hoped it was you! You're no good! You're no good!"

She was thumping now with the sobs she kept under her voice.

"Why, Hattie," he said, his drawl not quickened, "you don't mean that!"

"I do! You're a ruiner of lives! Her life! Mine! You're a rotten apple that can speck every one it touches."

"That's hard, Hattie, but I reckon you're not all wrong."

"Oh, that softy Southern talk won't get us anywhere, Morton. The very sound of it sickens me now. You're like a terrible sickness I once had. I'm cured now. I don't know what you want here, but whatever it is you

might as well go. I'm cured!"

He sat forward in his chair, still twirling the soft brown hat. He was dressed like that. Softly. Good-quality loosely woven stuffs. There was still a tan down of persistent youth on the back of his neck. But his hands were old, the veins twisted wiring, and his third finger yellowly stained, like meerschaum darkening.

"Grantin' everything you say, Hattie--and I'm holdin' no brief for myself--I've_ been the sick one, not you. Twenty years I've been down sick with hookworm."

"With devilishness."

"No, Hattie. It's the government's diagnosis. Hookworm. Been a sick man all my life with it. Funny thing, though, all those years in Rio knocked it out of me."

"Faugh!"

"I'm a new man since I'm well of it."

"Hookworm! That's an easy word for ingrained no-'countness, deviltry, and deceit. It wasn't hookworm came into the New Orleans stock company where I was understudying leads and getting my chance to play big things. It wasn't hookworm put me in a position where I had to take anything I could get! So that instead of finding me playing leads you find me here--black-face! It was a devil! A liar! A spendthrift, no-'count son out of a family that deserved better. I've cried more tears over you than I ever thought any woman ever had it in her to cry. Those months in that boarding house in Peach Tree Street down in New Orleans! Peach Tree Street! I remember how beautiful even the name of it was when you took me there--lying--and how horrible it became to me. Those months when I used to see your mother's carriage drive by the house twice a day and me crying my eyes out behind the curtains. That's what I've never forgiven myself for. She was a woman who stood for fine things in New Orleans. A good woman whom the whole town pitied! A no-'count son squandering her fortune and dragging down the family name. If only I had known all that then! She would have helped me if I had appealed to her. She wouldn't have let things turn out secretly--the way they did. She would have helped me. I--You--Why have you come here to jerk knives out of my heart after it's got healed with the points sticking in? You're nothing to me. You're skulking for a reason. You've been hanging around, getting pointers about me. My life is my own! You get out!"

"The girl. She well?"

It was a quiet question, spoken in the key of being casual, and Hattie, whose heart skipped a beat, tried to corral the fear in her eyes to take it casually, except that her eyelids seemed to grow old even as they

drooped. Squeezed grape skins.

"You get out, Morton," she said. "You've got to get out."

He made a cigarette in an old, indolent way he had of wetting it with his smile. He was handsome enough after his fashion, for those who like the rather tropical combination of dark-ivory skin, and hair a lighter shade of tan. It did a curious thing to his eyes. Behind their allotment of tan lashes they became neutralized. Straw colored.

"She's about sixteen now. Little over, I reckon."

"What's that to you?"

"Blood, Hattie. Thick."

"What thickened it, Morton--after sixteen years?"

"Used to be an artist chap down in Rio. On his uppers. One night, according to my description of what I imagined she looked like, he drew her. Yellow hair, I reckoned, and sure enough--"

"You're not worthy of the resemblance. It wouldn't be there if I had the saying."

"You haven't," he said, suddenly, his teeth snapping together as if biting off a thread.

"Nor you!" something that was the whiteness of fear lightening behind her mask. She rose then, lifting her chair out of the path toward the door and flinging her arm out toward it, very much after the manner of Miss Robinson in Act II.

"You get out, Morton," she said, "before I have you put out. They're closing the theater now. Get out!"

"Hattie," his calm enormous, "don't be hasty. A man that has come to his senses has come back to you humble and sincere. A man that's been sick. Take me back, Hattie, and see if--"

"Back!" she said, lifting her lips scornfully away from touching the word. "You remember that night in that little room on Peach Tree Street when I prayed on my knees and kissed--your--shoes and crawled for your mercy to stay for Marcia to be born? Well, if you were to lie on this floor and kiss my shoes and crawl for my mercy I'd walk out on you the way you walked out on me. If you don't go, I'll call a stage hand and make you go. There's one coming down the corridor now and locking the house. You go--or I'll call!"

His eyes, with their peculiar trick of solubility in his color scheme, seemed all tan.

"I'll go," he said, looking slim and Southern, his imperturbability ever so slightly unfrocked--"I'll go, but you're making a mistake, Hattie."

Fear kept clanging in her. Fire bells of it.

"Oh, but that's like you, Morton! Threats! But, thank God, nothing you can do can harm me any more."

"I reckon she's considerable over sixteen now. Let's see--"

Fire bells. Fire bells.

"Come out with what you want, Morton, like a man! You're feeling for something. Money? Now that your mother is dead and her fortune squandered, you've come to harass me? That's it! I know you, like a person who has been disfigured for life by burns knows fire. Well, I won't pay!"

"Pay? Why, Hattie--I want you--back--"

She could have cried because, as she sat there blackly, she was sick with his lie.

"I'd save a dog from you."

"Then save--her--from me."

The terrible had happened so quietly. Morton had not raised his voice; scarcely his lips.

She closed the door then and sat down once more, but that which had crouched out of their talk was unleashed now.

"That's just exactly what I intend to do."

"How?"

"By saving her sight or sound of you."

"You can't, Hattie."

"Why?"

"I've come back." There was a curve to his words that hooked into her heart like forceps about a block of ice. But she outstared him, holding her lips in the center of the comedy rim so that he could see how firm their bite.

"Not to me."

"To her, then."

"Even you wouldn't be low enough to let her know--"

"Know what?"

"Facts."

"You mean she doesn't know?"

"Know! Know you for what you are and for what you made of me? I've kept it something decent for her. Just the separation of husband and wife--who couldn't agree. Incompatibility. I have not told her--" And suddenly could have rammed her teeth into the tongue that had betrayed her. Simultaneously with the leap of light into his eyes came the leap of her error into her consciousness.

"Oh," he said, and smiled, a slow smile that widened as leisurely as sorghum in the pouring.

"You made me tell you that! You came here for that. To find out!"

"Nothin' the sort, Hattie. You only verified what I kinda suspected. Naturally, you've kept it from her. Admire you for it."

"But I lied! See! I know your tricks. She does know you for what you are and what you made of me. She knows everything. Now what are you going to do? She knows! I lied! I--" then stopped, at the curve his lips were taking and at consciousness of the pitiableness of her device.

"Morton," she said, her hands opening into her lap into pads of great pink helplessness, "you wouldn't tell her--on me! You're not that low!"

"Wouldn't tell what?"

He was rattling her, and so she fought him with her gaze, trying to fasten and fathom under the flicker of his lids. But there were no eyes there. Only the neutral, tricky tan.

"You see, Morton, she's just sixteen. The age when it's more important than anything else in the world to a young girl that's been reared like her to--to have her life _regular_! Like all her other little school friends. She's like that, Morton. Sensitive! Don't touch her, Morton. For God's sake, don't! Some day when she's past having to care so terribly--when she's older--you can rake it up if you must torture. I'll tell her then. But for God's sake, Morton, let us live--now!"

"Hattie, you meet me to-morrow morning and take a little journey to one of these little towns around here in Jersey or Connecticut, and your lie to her won't be a lie any more."

"Morton--I--I don't understand. Why?"

"I'll marry you."

"You fool!" she said, almost meditatively. "So you've heard we've gotten on a bit. You must even have heard of this"--placing her hand over the jar of the Brown Cold Cream. "You want to be in at the feast. You're so easy to read that I can tell you what you're after before you can get the coward words out. Marry you! You fool!"

It was as if she could not flip the word off scornfully enough, sucking back her lower lip, then hurling.

"Well, Hattie," he said, unbunching his soft hat, "I reckon that's pretty plain."

"I reckon it is, Morton."

"All right. Everybody to his own notion of carryin' a grudge to the grave. But it's all right, honey. No hard feelin's. It's something to know I was willin' to do the right thing. There's a fruit steamer out of here for N'Orleans in the mawnin'. Reckon I'll catch it."

"I'd advise you to."

"No objection to me droppin' around to see the girl first? Entitled to a little natural curiosity. Come, I'll take you up home this evenin'. The girl. No harm."

"You're not serious, Morton. You wouldn't upset things. You wouldn't tell--that--child!"

"Why, not in a thousand years, honey, unless you forced me to it. Well, you've forced me. Come, Hattie, I'm seein' you home this evenin'."

"You can't put your foot--"

"Come now. You're too clever a woman to try to prevent me. Course there's a way to keep me from goin' up home with you this evenin'. I wouldn't use it, if I were you. You know I'll get to see her. I even know where she goes to school. Mighty nice selection you made, Hattie, Miss Harperly's."

"You can't frighten me," she said, trying to moisten her lips with her tongue. But it was dry as a parrot's. It was hard to close her lips. They were oval and suddenly immobile as a picture frame. What if she could not swallow. There was nothing to swallow! Dry tongue. O God! Marcia!

That was the fleeting form her panic took, but almost immediately she could manage her lips again. Her lips, you see, they counted so! She

must keep them firm in the slippery shine of the comedy black.

"Come," he said, "get your make-up off. I'll take you up in a cab."

"How do you know it's--up?"

"Why, I don't know as I do know exactly. Just came kind of natural to put it that way. Morningside Heights is about right, I calculate."

"So--you _have_ --been watching."

"Well, I don't know as I'd put it thataway. Naturally, when I got to town--first thing I did--most natural thing in the world. That's a mighty fine car with a mighty fine-looking boy and a girl brings your--our girl home every afternoon about four. We used to have a family of Grosbeaks down home. Another branch, I reckon."

"O--God!" A malaprop of a tear, too heavy to wink in, came rolling suddenly down Hattie's cheek. "Morton--let--us--live--for God's sake! Please!"

He regarded the clean descent of the tear down Hattie's color-fast cheek and its clear drop into the bosom of her black-taffeta housemaid's dress.

"By Jove! The stuff _is_ color-fast! You've a fortune in that cream if you handle it right, honey."

"My way is the right way for me."

"But it's a woman's way. Incorporate. Manufacture it. Get a man on the job. Promote it!"

"Ah, that sounds familiar. The way you promoted away every cent of your mother's fortune until the bed she died in was mortgaged. One of your wildcat schemes again! Oh, I watched you before I lost track of you in South America--just the way you're watching--us--now! I know the way you squandered your mother's fortune. The rice plantation in Georgia. The alfalfa ranch. The solid-rubber-tire venture in Atlanta. You don't get your hands on my affairs. My way suits me!"

The tumult in her was so high and her panic so like a squirrel in the circular frenzy of its cage that she scarcely noted the bang on the door and the hairy voice that came through.

"All out!"

"Yes," she said, without knowing it.

"You're losing a fortune, Hattie. Shame on a fine, strapping woman like you, black-facing herself up like this when you've hit on something with

a fortune in it if you work it properly. You ought to have more regard for the girl. Black-face!"

"What has her--father's regard done for her? It's my black-face has kept her like a lily!"

"Admitting all that you say about me is right. Well, I'm here eating humble pie now. If that little girl doesn't know, bless my heart, I'm willin' she shouldn't ever know. I'll take you out to Greenwich to-morrow and marry you. Then what you've told her all these years is the truth. I've just come back, that's all. We've patched up. It's done every day. Right promoting and a few hundred dollars in that there cream will--"

She laughed. November rain running off a broken spout. Yellow leaves scuttling ahead of wind.

"The picture puzzle is now complete, Morton. Your whole scheme, piece by piece. You're about as subtle as corn bread. Well, my answer to you again is, 'Get out!'"

"All right. All right. But we'll both get out, Hattie. Come, I'm a-goin' to call on you--all up home a little while this evenin'!"

"No. It's late. She's--"

"Come, Hattie, you know I'm a-goin' to see that girl one way or another. If you want me to catch that fruit steamer to-morrow, if I were you I'd let me see her my way. You know I'm not much on raisin' my voice, but if I were you, Hattie, I wouldn't fight me."

"Morton--Morton, listen! If you'll take that fruit steamer without trying to see her--would you? You're on your uppers. I understand. Would a hundred--two hundred--"

"I used to light my cigarette with that much down on my rice swamps--"

"You see, Morton, she's such a little thing. A little thing with big eyes. All her life those eyes have looked right down into me, believing everything I ever told her. About you too, Morton. Good things. Not that I'm ashamed of anything I ever told her. My only wrong was ignorance. And innocence. Innocence of the kind of lesson I was to learn from you."

"Nothin' was ever righted by harping on it, Hattie."

"But I want you to understand--O God, make him understand--she's such a sensitive little thing. And as things stand now--glad I'm her mother. Yes, glad--black-face and all! Why, many's the time I've gone home from the theater, too tired to take off my make-up until I got into my own rocker with my ankles soaking in warm water. They swell so terribly sometimes. Rheumatism, I guess. Well, many a time when I kissed her in

her sleep she's opened her eyes on me--black-face and all. Her arms up and around me. I was there underneath the black! She knows that! And that's what she'll always know about me, no matter what you tell her. I'm there--her mother--underneath the black! You hear, Morton! That's why you must let us--live--"

"My proposition is the mighty decent one of a gentleman."

"She's only a little baby, Morton. And just at that age where being like all the other boys and girls is the whole of her little life. It's killing--all her airiness and fads and fancies. Such a proper little young lady. You know, the way they clip and trim them at finishing school. Sweet-sixteen nonsense that she'll outgrow. To-night, Morton, she's at a party. A boy's. Her first. That fine-looking yellow-haired young fellow and his sister that bring her home every afternoon. At their house. Gramercy Park. A fine young fellow--Phi Pi--"

"Looka here, Hattie, are you talking against time?"

"She's home asleep by now. I told her she had to be in bed by eleven. She minds me, Morton. I wouldn't--couldn't--wake her. Morton, Morton, she's yours as much as mine. That's God's law, no matter how much man's law may have let you shirk your responsibility. Don't hurt your own flesh and blood by coming back to us--now. I remember once when you cut your hand it made you ill. Blood! Blood is warm. Red. Sacred stuff. She's your blood, Morton. You let us alone when we needed you. Leave us alone, now that we don't!"

"But you do, Hattie girl. That's just it. You're running things a woman's way. Why, a man with the right promoting ideas--"

There was a fusillade of bangs on the door now, and a shout as if the hair on the voice were rising in anger.

"All out or the doors 'll be locked on yuh! Fine doings!"

She grasped her light wrap from its hook, and her hat with its whirl of dark veil, fitting it down with difficulty over the fizz of wig.

"Come, Morton," she said, suddenly. "I'm ready. You're right, now or never."

"Your face!"

"No time now. Later--at home! She'll know that I'm there--under the black!"

"So do I, Hattie. That's why I--"

"I'm not one of the ready-made heroines you read about. That's not my idea of sacrifice! I'd let my child hang her head of my shame sooner

than stand up and marry you to save her from it. Marcia wouldn't want me to! She's got your face--but my character! She'll fight! She'll glory that I had the courage to let you tell her the--truth! Yes, she will," she cried, her voice pleading for the truth of what her words exclaimed. "She'll glory in having saved me--from you! You can come! Now, too, while I have the strength that loathing you can give me. I don't want you skulking about. I don't want you hanging over my head--or hers! You can tell her to-night--but in my presence! Come!"

"Yes, sir," he repeated, doggedly and still more doggedly. "Yes, siree!" Following her, trying to be grim, but his lips too soft to click. "Yes--sir!"

They drove up silently through a lusterless midnight with a threat of rain in it, hitting loosely against each other in a shiver-my-timbers taxicab. Her pallor showing through the brown of her face did something horrid to her.

It was as if the skull of her, set in torment, were looking through a transparent black mask, but, because there were not lips, forced to grin.

And yet, do you know that while she rode with him Hattie's heart was high? So high that when she left him finally, seated in her little lamplit living room, it was he whose unease began to develop.

"I--If she's asleep, Hattie--"

Her head looked so sure. Thrust back and sunk a little between the shoulders.

"If she's asleep, I'll wake her. It's better this way. I'm glad, now. I want her to see me save myself. She would want me to. You banked on mock heroics from me, Morton. You lost."

Marcia was asleep, in her narrow, pretty bed with little bowknots painted on the pale wood. About the room all the tired and happy muss of after-the-party. A white-taffeta dress with a whisper of real lace at the neck, almost stiffishly seated, as if with Marcia's trimness, on a chair. A steam of white tulle on the dressing table. A buttonhole gardenia in a tumbler of water. One long white-kid glove on the table beside the night light. A naked cherub in a high hat, holding a pink umbrella for the lamp shade.

"Dear me! Dear me!" screamed Hattie to herself, fighting to keep her mind on the plane of casual things. "She's lost a glove again. Dear me! Dear me! I hope it's a left one to match up with the right one she saved from the last pair. Dear me!"

She picked up a white film of stocking, turning and exploring with spread fingers in the foot part for holes. There was one! Marcia's big

toe had danced right through. "Dear me!"

Marcia sleeping. Very quietly and very deeply. She slept like that. Whitely and straightly and with the covers scarcely raised for the ridge of her slim body.

Sometimes Marcia asleep could frighten Hattie. There was something about her white stillness. Lilies are too fair and so must live briefly. That thought could clutch so that she would kiss Marcia awake. Kiss her soundly because Marcia's sleep could be so terrifyingly deep.

"Marcia," said Hattie, and stood over her bed. Then again, "Mar-cia!" On more voice than she thought her dry throat could yield her.

There was the merest flip of black on the lacy bosom of Marcia's nightgown, and Hattie leaned down to fleck it. No. It was a pin--a small black-enameled pin edged in pearls. Automatically Hattie knew.

"Pi Phi!"

"Marcia," cried Hattie, and shook her a little. She hated so to waken her. Always had. Especially for school on rainy days. Sometimes didn't. Couldn't. Marcia came up out of sleep so reluctantly. A little dazed. A little secretive. As if a white bull in a dream had galloped off with her like Persephone's.

Only Hattie did not know of Persephone. She only knew that Marcia slept beautifully and almost breathlessly. Sweet and low. It seemed silly, sleeping beautifully. But just the same, Marcia did.

Then Hattie, not faltering, mind you, waited. It was better that Marcia should know. Now, too, while her heart was so high.

Sometimes it took as many as three kisses to awaken Marcia. Hattie bent for the first one, a sound one on the tip of her lip.

"Marcia!" she cried. "Marcy, wake up!" and drew back.

Something had happened! Darkly. A smudge the size of a quarter and the color of Hattie's guaranteed-not-to-fade cheek, lay incredibly on Marcia's whiteness.

Hattie had smudged Marcia! _Hattie Had Smudged Marcia!_

There it lay on her beautiful, helpless whiteness. Hattie's smudge.

* * * * *

It is doubtful, from the way he waited with his soft hat dangling from soft fingers, if Morton had ever really expected anything else. Momentary unease gone, he was quiet and Southern and even indolent about

it.

"We'll go to Greenwich first thing in the morning and be married," he said.

"Sh-h-h!" she whispered to his quietness. "Don't wake Marcia."

"Hattie--" he said, and started to touch her.

"Don't!" she sort of cried under her whisper, but not without noting that his hand was ready enough to withdraw. "Please--go--now--"

"To-morrow at the station, then. Eleven. There's a train every hour for Greenwich."

He was all tan to her now, standing there like a blur.

"Yes, Morton, I'll be there. If--please--you'll go now."

"Of course," he said. "Late. Only I--Well, paying the taxi--strapped me--temporarily. A ten spot--old Hat--would help."

She gave him her purse, a tiny leather one with a patent clasp. Somehow her fingers were not flexible enough to open it.

His were.

There were a few hours of darkness left, and she sat them out, exactly as he had left her, on the piano stool, looking at the silence.

Toward morning quite an equinoctial storm swept the city, banging shutters and signs, and a steeple on 122d Street was struck by lightning.

And so it was that Hattie's wedding day came up like thunder.



A STOLEN FESTIVAL

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Tiverton Tales*, by Alice Brown

David Macy's house stood on the spur of a breezy upland at the end of a road. The faraway neighbors, who lived on the main highway and could see the passin', often thanked their stars that they had been called to no such isolation; you might, said they, as well be set down in the middle of pastur'. They wondered how David's Letty could stand it. She had been married 'most a year, and before that she was forever on the go. But there! if David Macy had told her the sun rose in the west, she'd ha' looked out for it there every identical mornin'.

The last proposition had some color in it; for Letty was very much in love. To an impartial view, David was a stalwart fellow with clear gray eyes and square shoulders, a prosperous yeoman of the fibre to which America owes her being. But according to Letty he was something superhuman in poise and charm. David had no conception of his heroic responsibilities; nothing could have puzzled him more than to guess how the ideal of him grew and strengthened in her maiden mind, and how her after-worship exalted it into something thrilling and passionate, not to be described even by a tongue more facile than hers. Letty had a vivid nature, capable of responding to those delicate influences which move to spiritual issues. There were throes of love within her, of aspiration, of an ineffable delight in being. She never tried to understand them, nor did she talk about them; but then, she never tried to paint the sky or copy the robin's song. Life was very mysterious; but one thing was quite as mysterious as another. She did sometimes brood for a moment over the troubled sense that, in some fashion, she spoke in another key from "other folks," who did not appear to know that joy is not altogether joy, but three-quarters pain, and who had never learned how it brings its own aching sense of incompleteness; but that only seemed to her a part of the general wonder of things. There had been one strange May morning in her life when she went with her husband into the woods, to hunt up a wild steer. She knew every foot of the place, and yet one turn of the path brought them into the heart of a picture thrillingly new with the unfamiliarity of pure and living beauty. The evergreens enfolded them in a palpable dusk; but entrancingly near, shimmering under a sunny gleam, stood a company of birches in their first spring wear. They were trembling, not so much under the breeze as from the hurrying rhythm of the year. Their green was vivid enough to lave the vision in light; and Letty looked beyond it to a brighter vista still. There, in an opening, lay a bank of violets, springing in the sun. Their blue was a challenge to the skyey blue above; it pierced the sight, awaking new longings and strange memories. It seemed to Letty as if some invisible finger touched her on the heart and made her pause. Then David turned, smiling kindly upon her, and she ran to him with a little cry, and put her arms about his neck.

"What is it?" he asked, stroking her hair with a gentle hand. "What is it, little child?"

"Oh, it's nothin'!" said Letty chokingly. "It's only--I like you so!"

The halting thought had no purple wherein to clothe itself; but it meant as much as if she had read the poets until great words had become familiar, and she could say "love." He was the spring day, the sun, the blue of the sky, the quiver of leaves; and she felt it, and had a pain at her heart.

Now, on an autumn morning, David was standing within the great space in front of the barn, greasing the wheels preliminary to a drive to market; and Letty stood beside him, bareheaded, her breakfast dishes forgotten. She was a round thing, with quick movements not ordinarily belonging to one so plump; her black hair was short, and curled roughly, and there were freckles on her little snub nose. David looked up at her red cheeks and the merry shine of her eyes, and smiled upon her.

"You look pretty nice this mornin'," he remarked.

Letty gave a little dancing step and laughed. The sun was bright; there was a purple haze over the hills, and the nearer woods were yellow. The world was a jewel newly set for her.

"I _am_ nice!" said she. "David, do you know our anniversary's comin' on? It's 'most a year since we were married,--a year the fifteenth."

David loosened the last wheel, and rose to look at her.

"Sho!" said he, with great interest "Is that so? Well, 't was a good bargain. Best trade I ever made in _my_ life!"

"And we've got to celebrate," said Letty masterfully. "I'll tell you how. I've had it all planned for a month. We'll get up at four, have our breakfast, ride over to Star Pond, and picnic all day long. We'll take a boat and go out rowin', and we'll eat our dinner on the water!"

David smiled back at her, and then, with a sudden recollection, pursed his lips.

"I'm awful sorry, Letty," he said honestly, "but I've got to go over to Long Pastur' an' do that fencin', or I can't put the cattle in there before we turn 'em into the shack. You know that fence was all done up in the spring, but that cussed breachy cow o' Tolman's hooked it down; an' if I wait for him to do it--well, you know what he is!"

"Oh, you can put off your fencin'!" cried Letty. "Only one day! Oh, you can!"

"I could 'most any other time," said David, with reason, "but here it is 'most Saturday, an' next week the thrashin'-machine's comin'. I'm

awful sorry, Letty. I am, honest!"

Letty turned half round like a troubled child, and began grinding one heel into the turf. She was conscious of an odd mortification. It was not, said her heart, that the thing itself was so dear to her; it was only that David ought to want immeasurably to do it. She always put great stress upon the visible signs of an invisible bond, and she would be long in getting over her demand for the unreason of love.

David threw down the monkey-wrench, and put an arm about her waist.

"Come, now, you don't care, do you?" he asked lovingly. "One day's the same as another, now ain't it?"

"Is it?" said Letty, a smile running over her face and into her wet eyes. "Well, then, le's have Fourth o' July fireworks next Sunday mornin'!"

David looked a little hurt; but that was only because he was puzzled. His sense of humor wore a different complexion from Letty's. He liked a joke, and he could tell a good story, but they must lie within the logic of fun. Letty could put her own interpretation on her griefs, and twist them into shapes calculated to send her into hysterical mirth.

"You see," said David soothingly, "we're goin' to be together as long as we live. It ain't as if we'd got to rake an' scrape an' plan to git a minute alone, as it used to be, now is it? An' after the fencin' 's done, an' the thrashin', an' we've got nothin' on our minds, we'll take both horses an' go to Star Pond. Come, now! Be a good girl!"

The world seemed very quiet because Letty was holding silence, and he looked anxiously down at the top of her head. Then she relented a little and turned her face up to his--her rebellious eyes and unsteady mouth. But meeting the loving honesty of his look, her heart gave a great bound of allegiance, and she laughed aloud.

"There!" she said. "Have it so. I won't say another word. _I_ don't care!"

These were David's unconscious victories, born, not of his strength or tyranny, but out of the woman's maternal comprehension, her lavish concession of all the small things of life to the one great code. She had taken him for granted, and thenceforth judged him by the intention and not the act.

David was bending to kiss her, but he stopped midway, and his arm fell.

"There's Debby Low," said he. "By jinks! I ain't more 'n half a man when she's round, she makes me feel so sheepish. I guess it's that eye o' her'n. It goes through ye like a needle."

Letty laughed light-heartedly, and looked down the path across the lot. Debby, a little, bent old woman, was toiling slowly along, a large carpet-bag swinging from one hand. Letty drew a long breath and tried to feel resigned.

"She's got on her black alpaca," said she. "She's comin' to spend the day!"

David answered her look with one of commiseration, and, gathering up his wrench and oil, "put for" the barn.

"I'd stay, if I could do any good," he said hastily, "but I can't. I might as well stan' from under."

Debby threw her empty carpet-bag over the stone wall, and followed it, clambering slowly and painfully. Her large feet were clad in congress boots; and when she had alighted, she regarded them with deep affection, and slowly wiped them upon either ankle, a stork-like process at which David, safe in the barn, could afford to smile.

"If it don't rain soon," she called fretfully, "I guess you'll find yourselves alone an' forsaken, like pelicans in the wilderness. Anybody must want to see ye to traipse up through that lot as I've been doin', an' git their best clo'es all over dirt."

"You could ha' come in the road," said Letty, smiling. Letty had a very sweet temper, and she had early learned that it takes all sorts o' folks to make a world. It was a part of her leisurely and generous scheme of life to live and let live.

"Ain't the road dustier 'n the path?" inquired Debby contradictorily. "My stars! I guess 't is. Well, now, what do you s'pose brought me up here this mornin'?"

Letty's eyes involuntarily sought the bag, whose concave sides flapped hungrily together; but she told her lie with cheerfulness. "I don't know."

"I guess ye don't. No, I ain't comin' in. I'm goin' over to Mis' Tolman's, to spend the day. I'm in hopes she's got b'iled dish. You look here!" She opened the bag, and searched portentously, the while Letty, in some unworthy interest, regarded the smooth, thick hair under her large poke-bonnet. Debby had an original fashion of coloring it; and this no one had suspected until her little grandson innocently revealed the secret. She rubbed it with a candle, in unconscious imitation of an actor's make-up, and then powdered it with soot from the kettle. "I believe to my soul she does!" said Letty to herself.

But Debby, breathing hard, had taken something from the bag, and was holding it out on the end of a knotted finger.

"There!" she said, "ain't that your'n? Vianna said 't was your engagement ring."

Letty flushed scarlet, and snatched the ring tremblingly. She gave an involuntary look at the barn, where David was whistling a merry stave.

"Oh, my!" she breathed. "Where'd you find it?"

"Well, that's the question!" returned Debby triumphantly, "Where'd ye lose it?"

But Letty had no mind to tell. She slipped the ring on her finger, and looked obstinate.

"Can't I get you somethin' to put in your bag?" she asked cannily. Debby was diverted, though only for the moment.

"I should like a mite o' pork," she answered, lowering her voice and giving a glance, in her turn, at the barn. "I s'pose ye don't want _him_ to know of it?"

"I should like to be told why!" flamed Letty, in an indignation disproportioned to its cause. Debby had unconsciously hit the raw. "Do you s'pose I'd do anything David can't hear?"

"Law, I didn't know," said Debby, as if the matter were of very little consequence. "Mis' Peleg Chase, she gi'n me a beef-bone, t'other day, an' she says, 'Don't ye tell _him_!' An' Mis' Squire Hill gi'n me a pail o' lard; but she hid it underneath the fence, an' made me come for 't after dark. I dunno how you're goin' to git along with men-folks, if ye offer 'em the whip-hand. They'll take it, anyways. Well, don't you want to know where I come on this ring?"

Letty had taken a few hasty steps toward the house. "Yes, I do," owned she, turning about. "Where was it?"

"Well, Sammy was in swimmin', an' he dove into the Old Hole, to see 'f 't had any bottom to 't. Vianna made him vow he wouldn't go in whilst he had that rash; but he come home with his shirt wrong side out, an' she made him own up. But he'd ha' told anyway, he was so possessed to show that ring. He see suthin' gleamin' on a willer root nigh the bank, an' he dove, an' there 't was. I told Sammy mebbe you'd give him suthin' for 't, an' he said there wa'n't nothin' in the world he wanted but a mite o' David's solder, out in the shed-chamber."

"He shall have it," said Letty hastily. "I'll get it now. Don't you say anything!" And then she knew she had used the formula she detested, and that she was no better than Mrs. Peleg Chase, or the wife of Squire Hill.

She ran frowning into the house, and down and up from kitchen to

cellar. Presently she reappeared, panting, with a great tin pan borne before her like a laden salver. She set it down at Debby's feet, and began packing its contents into the yawning bag.

"There!" she said, working with haste. "There's the solder, all of it. And here's some of our sweet corn. We planted late."

Debby took an ear from the pan, and, tearing open the husk, tried a kernel with a critical thumb.

"Tough, ain't it?" she remarked, disparagingly. "Likely to be, this time o' year. Is that the pork?"

It was a generous cube, swathed in a fresh white cloth.

"Yes, it is," said Letty breathlessly, thrusting it in and shutting the bag. "There!"

"Streak o' fat an' streak o' lean?" inquired Debby remorselessly.

"It's the best we've got; that's all I can say. Now I've got to speak to David before he harnesses. Good-by!"

In a fever of impatience, she fled away to the barn.

"Well, if ever!" ejaculated Debby, lifting the bag and turning slowly about, to take her homeward path. "Great doin's _I_ say!" And she made no reply when Letty, prompted by a tardy conscience, stopped in the barn doorway and called to her, "Tell Sammy I'm much obliged. Tell him I shall make turnovers to-morrow." Debby was thinking of the pork, and the likelihood of its being properly diversified.

Letty swept into the barn like a hurrying wind. The horses backed, and laid their ears flat, and David, grooming one of them, gentled him and inquired of him confidentially what was the matter.

"Oh, David, come out here! please come out!" called Letty breathlessly. "I've got to see you."

David appeared, with some wonderment on his face, and Letty precipitated herself upon him, mindless of curry-comb and horse-hairs and the fact that she was presently to do butter. "David," she cried, "I can't stand it. I've got to tell you. You know this ring?"

David looked at it, interested and yet perplexed.

"Seems if I'd seen you wear it," said he.

Letty gave way, and laughed hysterically.

"Seems if you had!" she repeated. "I've wore it over a year. There

ain't a girl in town but knows it. I showed it to 'em all. I told 'em 'twas my engagement ring."

David looked at it, and then at her. She seemed to him a little mad. He could quiet the horses, but not a woman, in so vague an exigency.

"What made you tell 'em that?" he asked, at a venture.

"Don't you see? There wasn't one of 'em that was engaged but had a ring--and presents, David--and they knew I never had anything, or I'd have showed 'em."

David was not a dull man; he had very sound views on the tariff, and, though social questions might thrive outside his world, the town blessed him for an able citizen. But he felt troubled; he was condemned, and it was the world's voice which had condemned him.

"I don't know's I ever did give you anything, Letty," he said, with a new pain stirring in his face. "I don't b'lieve I ever thought of it. It wasn't that I begrudged anything."

"Oh, my soul, no!" cried Letty, in an agony of her own. "I knew how 't was. It wa'n't your way, but they didn't know that. And I couldn't have 'em thinkin' what they did think, now could I? So I bought me--David, I bought me that high comb I used to wear, and--and a blue handkerchief--and a thimble--and--and--this ring. And I said you give 'em to me. And I trusted to chance for your never findin' it out. But I always hated the things; and as soon as we were married, I broke the comb, and burnt up the handkerchief, and hammered the thimble into a little wad, and buried it. But I didn't dare to stop wearin' the ring, for fear folks would notice. Then t'other day I felt so about it I knew the time had come, and I went down to the Old Hole and threw it in. And now that hateful Sammy's found it and brought it back, and I've sent him your solder, and Debby's promised me she wouldn't tell you about the pork, and I--I'm no better than the rest of 'em that lie and lie and don't let their men-folks know!" Letty was sobbing bitterly, and David drew her into his arms and laid his cheek down on her hair. His heart was aching too. They had all the passionate sorrow of children over some grief not understood.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked at length.

"When?" said Letty chokingly.

"Then--when folks expected things--before we were married."

"Oh, David, I couldn't!"

"No," said David sadly, "I s'pose you couldn't."

Letty had been holding one hand very tightly clenched. It was a plump

hand, with deep dimples and firm, short fingers. She unclasped it, and stretched out toward him a wet, pink palm.

"There!" she said despairingly. "There's the ring."

Again David felt his inadequacy to the situation. "Don't you want to wear it?" he hesitated. "It's real pretty. What's that red stone?"

"I hate it!" cried Letty viciously. "It's a garnet. Oh, David, don't you ever let me set eyes on it again!"

David took it slowly from her hand. He drew out his pocket-book, opened it, and dropped the ring inside. "There!" he said, "I guess't won't do me no hurt to come acrost it once in a while." Then they kissed each other again, like two children; Letty's tears wet his face, and he felt them bitterer than if they had been his own.

But for Letty the air had cleared. Now, she felt, there was no trouble in her path. She had all the irresponsible joy of one who has had a secret, and feels the burden roll away. She was like Christian without his pack. She put her hands on David's shoulders, and looked at him radiantly.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she cried. "I'm just as wicked as I was before; but it don't seem to make any difference, now you know it!"

Though David also smiled, he was regarding her with a troubled wonder. He never expected to follow these varying moods. They were like swallow-flights, and he was content to see the sun upon their wings. So he drove thoughtfully off, and Letty went back to her work with a singing heart. She was not quite sure that it was right to be happy again, all at once, but she could not still her blood. To be forgiven, to find herself free from the haunting consciousness that she could deceive the creature to whom she held such passionate allegiance--this was enough to shape a new heaven and a new earth. Her simple household duties took on the significance of noble ceremonies. She sang as she went about them, and the words were those of a joyous hymn. She seemed to be serving in a temple, making it clean and fragrant in the name of love.

Saturday was a day born of heavenly intentions. Letty ran out behind the house, where the ground rose abruptly, and looked off, entranced, into the blue distance. It was the stillest day of all the fall. Not a breath stirred about her; but in the maple grove at the side of the house, where the trees had turned early under the chill of an unseasonable night, yellow leaves were sifting down without a sound. Goldenrod was growing dull, clematis had ripened into feathery spray, and she knew how the closed gentians were painting great purple dashes by the side of the road. "Oh!" she cried aloud, in rapture. It was her wedding day; a year ago the sun had shone as warmly and benignantly as he was shining now, and the same haze had risen, like an exhalation,

from the hills. She saw a special omen in it, and felt herself the child of happy fortune, to be so mothered by the great blue sky. Then she ran in to give David his breakfast, and tell him, as they sat down, that it was their wedding morning. As she went, she tore a spray of blood-red woodbine from the wall, and bound it round her waist.

But David was not ready for breakfast; he was talking with a man at the barn, and half an hour later came hurrying in to his retarded meal.

"I've got to eat an' run," said he; "Job Fisher kep' me. It's about that ma'sh. But the time wa'n't wasted. He'll sell ten acres for twenty dollars less'n he said last week. Too bad to keep you waitin'! You'd ought to eat yours while't was hot."

Letty, with a little smile all to herself, sat demurely down and poured coffee; this was no time to talk of anniversaries. David ate in haste, and said good-by.

"I'm goin' down the lot to get my withes," said he. "Whilst I'm gone, you put me up a mite o' luncheon, I sha'n't lay off to come home till night."

"Oh, David!" said Letty, with a little cry. Then the same knowing smile crept over her face. "No, I sha'n't," added she willfully. "I'm goin' to bring it to you."

"Fetch me my dinner? Why, it's a mile and a half 'cross lots! I guess you won't!"

"You go right along, David," said Letty decisively. "I don't want to hear another word. I ain't seen the Long Pastur' this summer, and I'm comin'. Good-by!" She disappeared down the cellar stairs with the butter-plate poised on a pyramid of dishes, and David, having no time to argue, went off to his work.

About ten o'clock Letty took her way down to the Long Pasture; she was a very happy woman, and she could hold her happiness before her face, regarding it frankly and with a full delight. The material joys of life might seem to escape her; but she could have them, after all. The great universe, warm with sun and warm with love, was on her side. Even the day seemed something tangible in gracious being; and as Letty trudged along, her basket on her arm, she reasoned upon her own riches and owned she had enough. David was not like anybody else; but he was better than anybody else, and he was hers. Even his faults were dearer than other men's virtues. She heard the sound of his axe upon the stakes, breaking the lovely stillness with a significance lovelier still.

"David!" she called, long before reaching the little brook that runs beneath the bank, and he leaped the fence and came to meet her. "David!" she repeated, and looked up in his face with eyes so solemn

and so full of light that he held her still a moment to look at her.

"Letty," he said, "you're real pretty!" And then they both laughed, and walked on together through the shade.

The day knit up its sweet, long minutes full of the serious beauty of the woods. David worked hard, and for a time Letty lingered near him; then she strayed away, and came back to him, from moment to moment, with wonderful treasures. Now it was cress from the spring, now a palm-full of partridge berries, or a cluster of checkerberry leaves for a "cud," or a bit of wood-sorrel. By and by the fall stillness gave out a breath of heat, and the sun stood high overhead. Letty spread out her dinner, and David made her a fire among the rocks. The smoke rose in a blue efflorescence; and with the sweet tang of burning wood yet in the air, they sat down side by side, drinking from one cup, and smiling over the foolish nothings of familiar talk. At the end of the meal, Letty took a parcel from the basket, something wrapped in a very fine white napkin. She flushed a little, unrolling it, and her eyes deepened.

"What's all this?" asked David, sniffing the air. "Fruit-cake?"

Letty nodded without looking at him; there was a telltale quivering in her face. She divided the cake carefully, and gave her husband half. David had lain back on a piny bank; and as he ate, his eyes followed the treetops, swaying a little now in a rhythmic wind. But Letty ate her piece as if it were sacramental bread. She put out her hand to him, and he stroked the short, faithful fingers, and then held them close. He smiled at her; and for a moment he mused again over that starry light in her eyes. Then his lids fell, and he had a little nap, while Letty sat and dreamed back over the hours, a year and more ago, when her mother's house smelled of spices, and this cake was baked for her wedding day.

When they went home again, side by side, the fencing was all done, and David had an after-consciousness of happy playtime. He carried the basket, with his axe, and Letty, like an untired little dog, took brief excursions of discovery here and there, and came back to his side with her weedy treasures. Once--was it something in the air?--he called to her:--

"Say, Letty, wa'n't it about this kind o' weather the day we were married?"

But Letty gave a little cry, and pointed out a frail white butterfly on a mullein leaf. "See there, David! how cold he looks! I'd like to take him along. He'll freeze to-night." David forgot his question, and she was glad. Some inner voice was at her heart, warning her to leave the day unspoiled. Her joy lay in remembering; it seemed a small thing to her that he should forget.

"We've had a real good time," he said, as he gave her the basket at the kitchen door. "Now, as soon as thrashin' 's done, we'll go to Star Pond."

After supper they covered up the squashes, for fear of a frost; and then they stood for a moment in the field, and looked at the harvest moon, risen in a great effrontery of splendor.

"Letty," asked David suddenly, "shouldn't you like to put on your little ring? It's right here in my pocket."

"No! no!" said Letty hastily. "I never want to set eyes on it again."

"I guess I'll get you another one 't you could wear. I looked t'other day when I went to market; but there was so many I didn't das't to make a choice unless you was with me."

Letty clung to him passionately. "Oh, David," she cried, with a break in her voice, "I don't want any rings. I want just you."

David put out one hand and softly touched the little blue kerchief about her head. "Anyway," he said, "we won't have any more secrets from one another, will we?"

Letty gave a little start, and she caught her breath before answering:--

"No, we won't--not unless they're nice ones!"



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